

# Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period

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Much has been written about the dating of the domestic textiles from Byzantine Egypt, about their techniques, and about the sources of their iconography in relation to other works of art, especially illustrations in books. The focus of this paper will be a topic to which less attention has been paid, namely, the *function* of the images on these textiles, and especially their role as charms intended to deflect evil and to bring good luck.<sup>1</sup> The following pages will consider two principal questions: how did the designs work as magic on behalf of those people who owned the textiles, and how did the magical purposes of the images affect their design?

Most of the weavings that have survived from the early Byzantine period have been preserved in Egypt, on account of its dry climate, and for this reason there has been a tendency to discuss them in isolation, as if separated from artistic and social developments elsewhere. But much of their repertoire of designs was common to the Byzantine world in general.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, although the illustrations to this paper will, of necessity, be drawn from Egypt, the substance of its observations may have a more general application.

Many of the textiles used in early Byzantine households had a dual function. In one realm, that of day-to-day living, the textiles worked materially,

in that they were designed to perform physical tasks; a tunic, for example, could keep a person warm, or a curtain could screen an opening. Certain fabrics and designs carried connotations of status; for example, costly silks had an obvious social function in the material world, as did silk-derived motifs in tapestry weave that exhibited the bilateral symmetry associated with draw-loom weaving. But, in another realm, the world of spirits and demons, the same textiles could work in an immaterial fashion, when they were marked with devices that influenced the powers of the unseen world.<sup>3</sup> In this sense the designs on early Byzantine domestic textiles were more than mere conveyors of messages; it was not only information that they projected, such as social rank or status, but a force operating invisibly on behalf of the wearers or users of the textiles. The designs that will be discussed in this paper were not just signs in a discourse, but also weapons in a war against invisible enemies whose power was everywhere. They appeared at all social levels, from the finest silks to the roughest tapestry weaves. In most cases, the function of the textile in the physical world is more obvious to the modern viewer than its function in the supernatural. An early Byzantine tunic can still be recognized without difficulty as a garment, even if fashions have changed over the centuries since it was made, and a silk can still be appreciated for its sumptuary value. But the motifs that appear woven into its fabric may strike the twentieth-century observer as pure decoration, while to the original wearer they were not just ornaments but also guarantees of his or her own well-being and safety.

This paper has benefited greatly from discussions with Anna Gonosová, who also read an earlier draft and suggested numerous improvements.

<sup>1</sup>A brief discussion of the apotropaic significance of tunic decorations can be found in D. L. Carroll, *Looms and Textiles of the Copts. First Millennium Egyptian Textiles in the Carl Austin Rietz Collection of the California Academy of Sciences*, *Memoirs of the California Academy of Sciences* 11 (Seattle, 1988), 54–55, 86.

<sup>2</sup>On this point, see A. Gonosová, "Textiles," in *Beyond the Pharaohs: Egypt and the Copts in the 2nd to 7th Centuries A.D.*, exhibition catalogue, Rhode Island School of Design, ed. F. D. Friedman (Providence, 1989), 65–72.

<sup>3</sup>On the two realms, see E. D. Maguire, H. P. Maguire, and M. J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, exhibition catalogue, Krannert Art Museum (Urbana, Ill., 1989), 2–33.

The designs appearing on the household textiles of the Byzantine period, from the fourth to the seventh century, can be divided into two classes, those that were of a non-Christian character, which were much more numerous, and those that were overtly Christian in nature. The non-Christian designs can be subdivided into two further groups according to their function, for some were intended to *protect* the user of the textile from harm, while others were intended to *attract* good fortune and prosperity. The first part of this paper will be devoted to the non-Christian designs, considering first the apotropaic motifs, which provided a defense against evil, and then the designs which attracted prosperity. The second part will be devoted to the more limited number of designs that were explicitly Christian.

Among the most frequent motifs on textiles, especially the earlier ones, of the third to the sixth centuries, are knots and interlaces.<sup>4</sup> A typical example is the medallion of tapestry weave shown in Fig. 1, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which encloses an interlace of knots forming a series of crosses within an eight-pointed star.<sup>5</sup> The power of such designs in the supernatural realm was conveyed by the Greek language itself, for the verb *καταδέω* meant both to bind physically and to bind by spells, or to enchant.<sup>6</sup> Knots and interlaces were not confined to the decoration of textiles, but they appeared in several other media, especially floor mosaics, where their apotropaic function is sometimes reinforced by an inscription. One of the panels in a recently discovered floor mosaic of the seventh or eighth century in the nave of a church at Shuneh-Nimrin in Jordan, for example, displays a knot surrounded by the inscription  $\text{†MEΘ HMΩN Ω ΘC}$ , or "God with us" (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> Knots protected the dead as well as the living, as can be seen from a stone relief now in the Coptic Museum at Cairo, which displays the type of interlace known as the "Knot of Hercules"

(Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> Here the knot, which is tied with the stems of a vine, is flanked by a cross on the left side and on the right by the common apotropaic formula  $\text{EIC ΘEOC}$  ("One God"), a phrase also appearing on magical amulets, such as the example illustrated in Figure 4.<sup>9</sup>

Another image common in textiles that was invested with protective powers is the horseman triumphing over a fierce beast or over a human adversary.<sup>10</sup> Frequently the identity of the horseman is ambiguous, as in the roundels of tapestry weave in Figures 6 and 7, from the collections of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of New York and the Textile Museum of Washington, D.C., respectively, both of which show the rider dominating a lion.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to say who these nimbed riders were originally intended to represent—whether Solomon,<sup>12</sup> Alexander,<sup>13</sup> or some other potent rider—or, indeed, whether there was ever any intent on behalf of the weavers or the wearers to identify the riders with any specific individual. But the general sense of the image can be judged by reference to a type of amulet common in the early Byzantine period, which is shown in Figures 4 and 5.<sup>14</sup> On one side of the pendant is engraved a nimbed rider with a recumbent foe and a large lion under the hooves of his horse; above the rider is the apotro-

<sup>8</sup>J. Strzygowski, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Koptische Kunst* (Cairo, 1904), 108, fig. 165. On the Hercules knot in general, see I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "The Byzantine Knotted Column," in *Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos*, ed. S. Vryonis (Malibu, 1985), 95–103, esp. 95–96.

<sup>9</sup>C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 49 (Ann Arbor, 1950), 303, no. 299. On the acclamation, see *ibid.*, 174–75.

<sup>10</sup>On the rider motif see *Art and Holy Powers*, 25–28. For its apotropaic significance on tunics, see G. P. Schiemenz, "KYPOY IΩANNOY in Umm er-Rus. Zur Bedeutung eines frühbyzantinischen Fussbodenmosaiks," in *Studien zur spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst und Kultur des Orients*, ed. G. Koch (Wiesbaden, 1982), 72–114, esp. 113.

<sup>11</sup>Cooper-Hewitt Museum, inv. no. 1902–1–71: *L'art copte*, exhibition catalogue, Petit Palais (Paris, 1964), 221, no. 273. Textile Museum, Washington, inv. no. 11.17: Nobuko Kajitani, "Coptic Fragments" (in Japanese), *Textile Art* 13 (1981), 53, fig. 69.

<sup>12</sup>On the rider Solomon, see G. Vikan, "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium," *DOP* 38 (1984), 65–86, esp. 79–81, figs. 19–20.

<sup>13</sup>On two surviving tapestry roundels in the Cleveland Museum of Art (inv. no. 59.123) and in the Textile Museum of Washington (inv. no. 11.18), which identify a horseman as Alexander of Macedon, see D. Shepherd, "Alexander—The Victorious Emperor," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 58 (1971), 245–50, figs. 1–2; *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 162, no. 70.

<sup>14</sup>Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 303, no. 299 (Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archaeology, Ann Arbor, inv. no. 26115); for this class of amulets see *ibid.*, 208–28, 302–7, pls. xiv–xvii, nos. 294–325.

<sup>4</sup>See the discussion by J. Trilling in *The Roman Heritage. Textiles from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean 300 to 600 A.D.*, *TMJ* 21 (Washington, D.C., 1982), 104–8. On the apotropaic significance of the motif, see E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, 1979), 263; Carroll, *Looms and Textiles of the Copts*, 86; *Art and Holy Powers*, 3–4.

<sup>5</sup>Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 89.18.151. *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 267.

<sup>6</sup>E. Dinkler, "Der Salomonische Knoten in der nubischen Kunst und die Geschichte des Motivs," *Études nubiennes* 77 (1978), 73–86.

<sup>7</sup>M. Piccirillo, "A Church at Shunat Nimrin," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* (1982), 335–42, esp. 338, pl. cviii, 2.

paic formula ΕΙC ΘΕΟC Ο ΝΙΚΩΝ ΤΑ ΚΑΚΑ, or “one God who conquers the evils.” On the other side of the amulet appears the image of the “much-suffering eye,” that is, the evil eye representing the envy of a neighbor, which might fall on any aspects of one’s good fortune, whether house, possessions, health, or children, and destroy them.<sup>15</sup> On this amulet, as on many others, the evil eye is being attacked by a trident and daggers and various noxious beasts such as snakes and scorpions. Above is an invocation to Jehovah Sabaoth and St. Michael, the two powers who, according to the magical text the Testament of Solomon, had given Solomon his seal against the demons.<sup>16</sup>

The second category of non-Christian designs is made up of motifs which invoked prosperity. In early Byzantine household textiles there is an abundance of images illustrating the fruitfulness of nature, in the form of plants and creatures of all kinds. Occasionally the visual message of these designs is reinforced by an inscription, as in the case of the wool and linen curtain fragment illustrated in Figure 8, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which displays a laden tree with the invocation ΕΥΦΟΙ, or “Flourish!,” written upon its trunk.<sup>17</sup> Often textiles portray creatures signifying the respective elements of earth, sea, and air, as does a sixth-century silk, wool, and linen band from a tunic, now in the Metropolitan Museum, which shows a snake, fish, and birds (Fig. 9).<sup>18</sup> Such portrayals of nature were more than mere *illustrations* of abundance and plenty; they were also magical amulets intended to *attract* the prosperity that they evoked. The imagery of the textiles is paralleled by a gold phylactery of the fifth or sixth century now in the Frühchristlich-Byzantinische Sammlung of Berlin (Fig. 10). This hollow cylinder, designed to be worn around the neck, originally contained some propitious object, such as an invocation or a relic. Two snakes, two fish (or dolphins), and two birds are depicted in relief on the body of the cylinder. As on the tunic-band, these creatures evoked the life of land, water, and air.

<sup>15</sup>On the “much suffering eye” see *ibid.*, 211; *Art and Holy Powers*, 4–5.

<sup>16</sup>Ed. C. C. McCown (Leipzig, 1922), p. 10\*.

<sup>17</sup>Boston Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 23.177.

<sup>18</sup>Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 90.5.154; Kajitani, “Coptic Fragments,” 49, fig. 64a. Other fragments from the same tunic are preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 35.87 (*Beyond the Pharaohs*, 158, no. 67) and in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. nos. 334–1887, 335–1887 (A. F. Kendrick, *Catalogue of Textiles from Burying-Grounds in Egypt, I, Graeco-Roman Period* [London, 1920], 66, no. 62, pl. 14; Kajitani, “Coptic Fragments,” 49, figs. 64b and c).

On the other side of the cylinder there are letters reading, in reverse, ΕΠ ΑΓΑΘΩ, or “For good” (Fig. 11).<sup>19</sup>

On many household textiles, the abundance of the earth was portrayed by personifications rather than by animals or plants. In some weavings Ge, or the Earth herself, was personified; she was shown as a woman richly attired as a demonstration of her power to bring wealth (Fig. 12).<sup>20</sup> Her force was not only generative, but also medicinal, for she was responsible for the efficacy of medicinal herbs and plants. For this reason she was invoked in incantations appended to herbals, such as the late antique herbal of Apuleius.<sup>21</sup> Through the personification of Ge, weavers were able to compress the benefits of all of nature into a small design which could be repeated several times over on a textile, like the reiteration of a charm. A typical example of the motif can be found on a piece of tapestry weave now preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art which, to judge from its size and shape, could have been part of a tunic (Fig. 12).<sup>22</sup> The fragment preserves a square ornament, or *segmentum*, in wool and linen, which is framed on two sides by an L-shaped strip, or *gammadion*. The personification of Ge is shown as a bust supported by two ducks and abundantly adorned with a jeweled crown, pendant earrings, and a jeweled necklace or collar around her neck; she appears once in the central square and is repeated on a smaller scale five times in the *gammadion*.

Another subject popular in textiles that was invested with the power to attract wealth and abundance was the River Nile.<sup>23</sup> The power of the land of Egypt and of the Nile as images of plenty can be seen, in a reverse fashion, in a passage from the ascetic writer, John Climachus. Speaking of gluttony, he says: “This devil often sits in the stomach and does not allow the man to be satisfied—not even if he were to eat the whole of Egypt and to

<sup>19</sup>V. H. Elbern, “Per speculum in aenigmate. Die ‘imago creatiois’ an einem frühchristlichen Phylakterion,” in *Studien zur spätantiken und byzantinischen Kunst* Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann gewidmet, ed. O. Feld and U. Peschlow, III (Bonn, 1986), 67–73, pl. 17.

<sup>20</sup>H. Maguire, “The Mantle of Earth,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 12, 2 (1987), 221–28.

<sup>21</sup>C. Singer, “The Herbal in Antiquity and Its Transmission to Later Ages,” *JHS* 47 (1927), 1–52, esp. 47–48; L. M. Hendrickson in *Survival of the Gods: Classical Mythology in Medieval Art*, exhibition catalogue, Department of Art, Brown University (Providence, 1987), 173.

<sup>22</sup>Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. no. 73.21; Maguire, “Mantle of Earth,” 224–25.

<sup>23</sup>On the Nile in textile decoration, see L. H. Abdel-Malek, “A Tapestry Roundel with Nilotic Scenes,” *TMJ* 25 (1986), 33–46.

drink the whole of the river Nile.”<sup>24</sup> The fertility of the Nile was, of course, a subject especially favored by artists working in Egypt, but it was also a sign of prosperity in other parts of the Mediterranean world.<sup>25</sup> The river was either illustrated by means of its typical creatures and vegetation or, more rarely, by personifications. The famous late fifth- or early sixth-century wool and linen shawl of Sabina, in the Louvre, is an example of the first type of iconography; as a foil to mythological scenes, it evokes the Nile through such typical Nilotic motifs as putti fishing from boats, waterfowl, and lotus plants (Fig. 13).<sup>26</sup> Two sixth- or seventh-century roundels of tapestry weave in the same museum, which show the personification of the Nile together with Abundance (Euthenia), are representative of the second type (Fig. 14).<sup>27</sup> These Nilotic scenes may have had a more than decorative value. A sermon of St. John Chrysostom, attacking the medical use of amulets, tells us of women in Constantinople who hung charms inscribed with the names of rivers about their necks “and committed a thousand other affronts of this kind.”<sup>28</sup>

It has already been observed, at the beginning of this paper, that overtly Christian designs were a minority of the motifs decorating household textiles. In most instances their function was essentially the same as that of the non-Christian designs—to protect and to attract good fortune. This was certainly true of the commonest of the Christian signs, the cross.<sup>29</sup> A sermon which was attributed to St. John Chrysostom describes the cross as a “miraculous gift,” which could be found on beds and on clothes, and which protected bodies besieged by demons.<sup>30</sup> The cross had supernatural

powers similar to those of such non-Christian designs as knots and the much-suffering eye. Inscriptions accompanying crosses carved on the door lintels of houses in Syria clearly state that the sign’s function was to avert the evil eye. For example, a text on the lintel of a house at Sabba, dated 547, affirms: “+ . . . the Lord will watch over the comings in and the goings out of this house; for as long as the cross is set in front of it the evil eye will not have power.”<sup>31</sup> An inscription on another lintel, from El-Bardouné in Syria, declares: “Where the cross is set in front, envy has no power.”<sup>32</sup>

To protect their persons, people crossed themselves on their foreheads,<sup>33</sup> wore crosses suspended from their necks, or had crosses incorporated into the designs of their jewelry and clothing. According to John Chrysostom, the ritual of marking the sign of the cross on the face with one’s finger would keep foul demons at a distance.<sup>34</sup> Some pectoral crosses were hollow, allowing the inclusion of relics to enhance the power of the sign.<sup>35</sup> Others, such as a jeweled gold cross in the Indiana University Art Museum (Fig. 15), were flanked by cases for relics or amulets.<sup>36</sup> The element of magic in the wearing of crosses can be gauged from the reactions of some church fathers, who were sensitive to superstition. St. Jeromé chided the “superstitious little women” who, by wearing cross-relics, showed more zeal for God than knowledge of him.<sup>37</sup> The sign of the cross was also incorporated into clothing, either as part of a repeating design or in imitation of pectoral crosses. The famous sixth-century mosaic of Orpheus from Jerusalem portrays, at its base, a woman labeled Theodosia who wears yellow crosslets woven at intervals into her long black tunic (Fig. 16).<sup>38</sup> A late tunic in the Brooklyn Museum, tapestry-woven in wool, incorporates into its front

<sup>24</sup> *Scala paradisi*, step 14, 96; ed. P. Trevisan (Turin, 1941), p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., a late 2nd- or early 3rd-century mosaic in the baths of the Villa del Nilo at Lepcis Magna depicting an allegory of the Nile, which includes a nilometer inscribed ΑΓΑΘΗ ΤΥΧΗ (“Good fortune”) at its top: L. Foucher, “Les mosaïques nilotiques africaines,” in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine. Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (Paris, 1965), 137–45, fig. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Musée du Louvre, inv. no. Gu 1230; K. Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art. Third to Seventh Century*, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1979), 134–35, no. 112; C. Delvoye, “Éléments iconographiques gréco-romains dans l’art copte: Le ‘châle de Sabina’ au Musée du Louvre,” *Chronique d’Égypte* 60 (1985), 48–55.

<sup>27</sup> Inv. no. X4129; P. du Bourguet, *Catalogue des étoffes coptes. Musée National du Louvre* (Paris, 1964), 132, nos. D36–37.

<sup>28</sup> *In epistolam ad Colossenses, Homilia VIII*, 5; PG 62, col. 358.

<sup>29</sup> On its apotropaic powers, see J. Engemann, “Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nichtchristlichen und christlichen Spätantike,” *JbAC* 18 (1975), 22–48, esp. 42–47.

<sup>30</sup> *Contra Judaeos et Gentiles*, 9; PG 48, col. 826.

<sup>31</sup> + . . . τοῦ οἴκου τούτου κύριος διαφυλάξει τὴν ἰσοδὸν καὶ τὴν ἔξοδον· τοῦ σταυροῦ γὰρ προκειμένου οὐκ ἰσχύσει ὀφθαλμὸς βάσκανος. F. J. Dölger, *IXΘYC*, I. *Das Fisch-Symbol in frühchristlicher Zeit* (Münster, 1928), 247.

<sup>32</sup> Σταυροῦ προκειμένου οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ὁ φθόνος. L. Jalabert and R. Mouterde, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie, IV* (Paris, 1955), 322–23, no. 1909.

<sup>33</sup> *Art and Holy Powers*, 19–20.

<sup>34</sup> *In Matthaum homilia LIV*, 4; PG 58, col. 537.

<sup>35</sup> A series of 9th- to 12th-century examples is illustrated in *Byzantium at Princeton*, exhibition catalogue, ed. S. Ćurčić and A. St. Clair (Princeton, 1986), 84–88, nos. 69–75.

<sup>36</sup> *Art and Holy Powers*, 165, no. 90.

<sup>37</sup> *Commentaria in Evangelium Matthaei*, XXIII, 6; PL 26, col. 175.

<sup>38</sup> The figure is probably a personification. See A. Grabar, “Recherches sur les sources juives de l’art paléochrétien,” *CahArch* 12 (1962), 119, fig. 3; A. Ovadia and S. Mucznik, “Orpheus from Jerusalem—Pagan or Christian Image?” *The Jerusalem Cathedral* 1 (1981), 152–66, esp. 158–61, fig. 11.



a simulated pendant cross on a chain which is of the same type as a bronze example in the Malcove collection at Toronto (Figs. 17 and 18).<sup>39</sup> Often, as in the case of the cross incorporated into the Brooklyn tunic, the woven crosses were jeweled (Fig. 17). Such make-believe gems may have embodied a wish on the part of the wearers: "Indeed," wrote the sixth-century poet Venantius Fortunatus, "that man is exceedingly happy when his limbs are covered by the gleam of precious stones instead of by wool!"<sup>40</sup>

On some textiles the power of the cross was combined with the power of sacred words. A small ornament from a tunic now in the Brooklyn Museum displays a cross-shaped acrostic composed of the words ΦΩC and ΖΩΗ, or "Light" and "Life" (Fig. 19).<sup>41</sup> This acrostic is one of the devices protecting the entrances to sixth-century houses and fortifications in Syria. Over the doorway of a tower at El Fān et Tahtānī, for example, it appears inscribed in a circle flanked by an inscription that reads, in part: "God, born of the Virgin Mary, help this house!"<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes the force of the cross was added to propitious designs of a non-Christian character, such as interlace (Fig. 1), or personifications. A panel of tapestry weave in the Louvre shows in its central medallion the bust of a richly dressed woman holding a fold of cloth in front of her, in the same manner as some portrayals of Earth (Fig. 20).<sup>43</sup> This medallion is inscribed within a square which has extensions on each of its four sides so as to form the arms of a cross. In each of the corners

of the square there are two small crosses, flanking a bird. Here the crosses appear to act as seals, guaranteeing the abundance promised by the personification.

Portrayals of Christian saints also appeared on textiles, although rarely with inscriptions giving precise identifications. An exception is a tapestry-woven stole in the Worcester Art Museum on which Christ, Mary, and other saints were invoked both by name and by image.<sup>44</sup> The Virgin, identified as ΜΑΡΙΑ, raises her two hands in the orant pose (Fig. 21). Such images are mentioned in the fifth century by Theodoret, writing near Antioch, who speaks of garments woven with silken or woolen threads so as to depict all kinds of animals, and trees, as well as figures of men, some hunting, and some in prayer.<sup>45</sup> The juxtapositions made by Theodoret are matched by some surviving textiles. For example, a band of wool and linen tapestry weave now in Prague depicts a nimbed woman in the orant pose (Fig. 22) flanked on either side by lions, dogs, and tree-like motifs.<sup>46</sup> Images of orant saints were also worn as amulets. The example illustrated in Figure 23, in the British Museum, has on its back an invocation to St. Procopius, a martyr of Caesarea in Palestine.<sup>47</sup> This particular amulet is of hematite, or bloodstone, a material believed to have the magical property of preventing hemorrhages.<sup>48</sup> Some tunic ornaments in silk, such as the fragment in the Philadelphia Museum of Art illustrated in Figure 24, display a standing warrior who holds a cross in his left hand, and in his right a cross-headed spear with which he spears a dragon. This figure, clothed in a tunic and cloak, has been interpreted convincingly as a soldier saint such as George or Theodore, whose role was to protect the wearer of the tunic.<sup>49</sup>

The most explicitly Christian of the designs appearing on domestic textiles, namely, scenes that were derived from the Bible, might seem the least affected by the magic that controlled so much of

<sup>39</sup> Brooklyn Museum, inv. no. 38.753; D. Thompson, *Coptic Textiles in the Brooklyn Museum* (New York, 1971), 82–83, no. 36. The bronze cross is published in S. D. Campbell, ed., *The Malcove Collection: A Catalogue of the Objects in the Lillian Malcove Collection of the University of Toronto* (Toronto, 1985), 115, no. 156.

<sup>40</sup> The quotation is from the titulus of a painting of St. Martin giving his tunic to the poor man, which was one of a series decorating the Cathedral at Tours. *Opera poetica*, ed. F. Leo (MGH, AA, IV, 1, Berlin, 1881), *Carminum liber X*, 6, p. 238; H. Kessler, "Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul," *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Studies in the History of Art 16, National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C., 1985), 75–91, esp. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Brooklyn Museum, inv. no. 15.440; *Pagan and Christian Egypt: Egyptian Art from the First to the Tenth Century A.D.*, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum (1941), 78, no. 245.

<sup>42</sup> Ο Θεός ὁ τεχθεὶς ἐκ Παρθένου Μαρίας, Βοήθησον τὸν οἶκον τοῦτον. M. Freiherr von Oppenheim and H. Lucas, "Griechische und lateinische Inschriften aus Syrien, Mesopotamien, und Kleinasien," *BZ* 14 (1905), 1–72, esp. 34, pl. II, fig. 8; *IGLSy*, IV (Paris, 1955), 304–5, no. 1862. For other examples of the acrostic, see: *IGLSy*, IV, 231, no. 1682, 239, no. 1701, 307, no. 1869; Dölger, *IXΘYC*, I, 247–48 note 2.

<sup>43</sup> Inv. no. E 29080. For comparable depictions of Earth, see Maguire, "Mantle of Earth," 221–28, esp. 223–25, figs. 2–3, 5, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Worcester Art Museum, inv. no. 1949.27 a, b, c; *Pagan and Christian Egypt*, 84, no. 264. The stole is possibly, but not necessarily, liturgical. On the stole in the Coptic church, see A. J. Butler, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, II (Oxford, 1884), 127–43. For a Christian funerary stele from Karnak or Luxor which shows a woman wearing a patterned stole, see K. Wessel, *Coptic Art* (London, 1965), 102, fig. 80.

<sup>45</sup> *De providentia oratio IV*; PG 83, col. 617D.

<sup>46</sup> Arts and Crafts Museum, Prague, inv. no. 2245; L. Kybalová, *Coptic Textiles* (London, 1967), 136, figs. 86, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 309, no. 334; see also *ibid.*, no. 335.

<sup>48</sup> Vikar, "Art, Medicine, and Magic," 65–86, esp. 81.

<sup>49</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no. 33.83.1; see *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 218, no. 131, where other silks bearing the same motif are listed.

the imagery of the Early Christian home. Yet even the biblical subjects appearing on household weavings were not straightforward narratives, but were designed to be amulets or charms.<sup>50</sup> As such, they differed from the monumental art of churches or from miniatures in books, which had different functions. The Christian narratives on household textiles were not directed at readers or churchgoers in order to engage or instruct. Rather, they were directed at an unseen audience, being intended to invoke the aid of the holy powers and to block the strength of supernatural malice. They are characterized by selectivity and repetition; only the most potent elements of a story were included for illustration, and these were often reiterated several times for maximum effect. As narrative illustrations of the Bible text the images on the textiles may appear to the modern viewer to be abbreviated to the point of obscurity, but this would not have impeded their effectiveness as magic.

Although most of the surviving textiles with christological scenes are relatively late, of the sixth century or later, we know that people were wearing episodes from the Gospels woven into their clothes as early as the fourth century, because of a long complaint by Asterius, the bishop of Amaseia in northern Turkey. He attacks those who

... devise for themselves, their wives and children gay-colored dresses decorated with thousands of figures. . . . When they come out in public dressed in this fashion, they appear like painted walls to those they meet. . . . The more religious among rich men and women, having picked out the story of the Gospels, have handed it over to the weavers—I mean our Christ together with all His disciples, and each one of the miracles the way it is related. You may see the wedding of Galilee with the water jars, the paralytic carrying his bed on his shoulders, the blind man healed by means of clay, the woman with an issue of blood seizing [Christ's] hem, the sinful woman falling at the feet of Jesus, Lazarus coming back to life from his tomb. In doing this they consider themselves to be religious and to be wearing garments that are pleasing to God.<sup>51</sup>

The first observation to be made concerning this passage is that these clothes were being worn by lay

<sup>50</sup>The amuletic significance of New Testament scenes in jewelry has been explored by Ernst Kitzinger and Gary Vikan in the case of a group of marriage rings of the 7th century: E. Kitzinger, "Christian Imagery: Growth and Impact," in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. K. Weitzmann (New York, 1980), 141–63, esp. 151–52; idem, "Reflections on the Feast Cycle in Byzantine Art," *CahArch* 36 (1988), 51–73, esp. 62; G. Vikan, "Art, Medicine, and Magic," 83–84.

<sup>51</sup>*Homilia I*; PG 40, col. 168. Translation after C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents*, (Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 50–51.

people; there is no suggestion that they might have served as liturgical costumes, in the same fashion as the much later Byzantine ecclesiastical vestments that were decorated with Christian scenes. Second, it is significant that clothes decorated in such a fashion were felt to be "pleasing to God"; that is, by wearing them, people hoped to win God's favor. It cannot be an accident that, with only one exception, the scenes listed by Asterius were all miracles. Clearly, one of the functions of the Gospel scenes on the clothing was to ward off sickness and to obtain good health. Such a conclusion is confirmed by the nature of images on the surviving tunics which retain New Testament scenes. The episodes are often highly compressed and the individual subjects are frequently repeated several times on the same piece of clothing, in the manner of charms.

Among the surviving pieces of clothing with Gospel scenes are the fragments of a wool and linen tunic in the Field Museum in Chicago, dating to the seventh or eighth century (Figs. 25 and 26).<sup>52</sup> The weavings on the tunic are difficult to read, but among them can be recognized portrayals of the Annunciation and the Nativity. The latter is in the center of a clavus strip, reduced to just the Child lying in his crib flanked by the heads of the ox and the ass (Fig. 26). It is also possible to identify the Adoration of the Magi, and the Baptism, which is shown in the surviving roundels (Fig. 25). Of these scenes, both the Adoration of the Magi and the Baptism were repeated at least twice. The function of the scenes on the tunic, to call on God's aid, is expressed by an inscription on a magnificent gold encolpium of the sixth century, from the highest level of society, now at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 27).<sup>53</sup> This pendant displays three of the same scenes that appear on the tunic: the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi on the front, beneath an image of the enthroned Virgin, and the Baptism on the reverse. The images on the front of the medallion are accompanied by the invocation "Christ, our God, help us!"<sup>54</sup> Even more explicit in its expressed wish for personal security is a gold locket in the British Museum which probably contained relics of the physician saints Cosmas and Damian; its lid bears nielloed images of

<sup>52</sup>Field Museum, inv. no. 173758.

<sup>53</sup>M. C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, II, Jewellery, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period* (Washington, D.C., 1965), 33–35, pl. 28.

<sup>54</sup>XPICTE O ΘEOC HMΩN BOHΘICON HMIN.

the birth of Christ and the Magi before the Child, while on the back is written "The secure safety and averting of all the evils" (Fig. 28).<sup>55</sup>

The Adoration of the Magi is a subject found on a number of surviving tunics, such as a seventh-century example in the British Museum, on which the scene appeared repeated six times in the large roundels of tapestry weave (Fig. 29), and also in abbreviated form on the clavus bands.<sup>56</sup> Gary Vikan has recently suggested that the popularity of this subject on sixth- and seventh-century tokens and jewelry, such as the gold pseudo-medallion from Siderno, in Calabria, illustrated in Figure 30, was due to the Magi being seen as protectors of pilgrims and travelers.<sup>57</sup>

There are a few surviving tunic ornaments which are of particular interest because they preserve the subjects listed by Asterius of Amaseia, namely, a series of miracle scenes. Figure 31 illustrates a seventh- or eighth-century wool and linen clavus strip now in the National Museum in Copenhagen.<sup>58</sup> The healings are depicted one above the other on the narrow band, and are, as usual, hard to read on account of their compression. In two of them it is possible to recognize the haloed figure of Christ standing behind a mattress and gesturing to a prostrate figure who lies on the bed. In another scene Christ stands beside a figure who kneels before him with outstretched hands.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> + Η ΒΕΒΑΙΑ ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΑΠΟΣΤΡΟΦΗ ΠΑΝΤΩΝ ΤΩΝ ΧΑΚΩΝ. O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum* (London, 1901), 46–47.

<sup>56</sup> British Museum, inv. no. 1901–3–14; Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities*, 168–69; L. H. Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries and Related Antiquities*, Ph.D. diss. (Boston University, 1980), 169, 197, 227.

<sup>57</sup> W. F. Volbach, "Un medaglione d'oro con l'immagine di S. Teodoro nel Museo di Reggio Calabria," *ASTCal* 13 (1943–44), 65–72, esp. 67, fig. 7; G. Vikan, "Pilgrims in Magi's Clothing: The Impact of *Mimesis* on Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. R. Ousterhout (Urbana, Ill., 1989), 103–6. On some pieces of jewelry the scene is accompanied by an invocation such as KYPIE BOHΘEI ("Lord help [the wearer]"); J. Engel, "Une découverte énigmatique: La fibule chrétienne d'Attalens," *Dossiers, histoire et archéologie* 62 (1982), 88–91.

<sup>58</sup> National Museum, Copenhagen, 12137; O. Koefoed-Petersen, *Koptik Kunst* (Copenhagen, 1944), 63. A similar clavus fragment is preserved in the collection of the British Museum, inv. no. 30806; *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 217, no. 130.

<sup>59</sup> A fragment of a tapestry roundel in the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyon (inv. no. 24569/10; Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 179, 231) appears to go even further in compression, for it thrice repeats the figure of Christ (with a cruciform nimbus) extending his arm as if performing miracles, but does not show any beneficiaries. Here the most powerful element of the miracle scenes (the healing gesture of Christ) has been extracted and reiterated for greater effect.

Again, a parallel can be drawn with amulets, such as the example drawn in Figure 32, a gold encolpium found at Adana, which illustrates five miraculous healings of Christ, together with the Raising of Lazarus and the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>60</sup> The iconodule Patriarch Nicephorus said that many Christians wore phylacteries bearing images of the miracles of Christ as a safeguard for both their souls *and* their bodies, believing that these phylacteries had the power to cure their sufferings and to avert the attacks of the unclean demons.<sup>61</sup>

The imagery on amulets and clothing has parallels in the wording of the written charms that people wore inside their phylacteries. The following example, found at Oxyrhynchus and dating to the fifth century, is typical of its genre. The text was inscribed upon a piece of papyrus that had been tightly folded and tied with a string. Although the phraseology of the charm is purely Christian—like the images on the textiles—the repetitions and the references to demons breathe the spirit of magic.

"Fly, hateful spirit!" it begins, "Christ pursues thee; the son of God and the Holy Spirit have outstripped thee. O God (who healed the man at) the sheep pool, deliver from every evil thy handmaid Joannia whom Anastasia also called Euphemia bare. . . . O Lord Christ, Son and Word of the living God, who healest every sickness and every infirmity, heal and regard thy handmaid Joannia, whom Anastasia also called Euphemia bare. Chase from her and put to flight all fevers and every kind of chill, quotidian, tertian, and quartan, and every evil. . . . Upon thy name, O Lord God, have I called, the wonderful and exceeding glorious name, the terror of thy foes. Amen."<sup>62</sup>

The last category of scenes to be considered comprises those from the Old Testament. Here the approach to textile iconography that has been followed in the preceding pages can be used to suggest a solution to a long-standing iconographic puzzle, namely, the significance of a small cycle of scenes from the life of Joseph that appears on some fifty-four surviving tunic ornaments, some of

<sup>60</sup> *DACL*, I, 2, col. 1819, fig. 485; E. B. Smith, "A Lost Encolpium and Some Notes on Early Christian Iconography," *BZ* 23 (1914), 217–25, esp. 218–19.

<sup>61</sup> *Antirrheticus* III, 36; PG, 100, col. 433. On this often-cited passage see, most recently, E. Kitzinger, "Reflections on the Feast Cycle in Byzantine Art," *CahArch* 36 (1988), 51–73, esp. 66.

<sup>62</sup> Translation by A. S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, VIII (London, 1911), 251–53.

which were evidently woven for children.<sup>63</sup> It seems that these ornaments showing the life of Joseph began to be made in the late sixth or early seventh century, but they continued to be popular for some time after that; they are, in fact, more numerous than the tunic ornaments devoted to the life of Christ. The majority of the Joseph textiles are tapestry-woven medallions, shoulder bands, or sleeve bands, which were originally applied in sets to tunics. The scenes are usually taken only from the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis. The typical arrangement is illustrated by a roundel of wool and linen tapestry weave now in Trier (Fig. 33).<sup>64</sup> At the center of the medallion is a circle containing Joseph's second dream, related in Genesis 37:9, in which Joseph dreams that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down before him. The cycle continues at the top left of the medallion, showing the following scenes going in a counter-clockwise direction: Joseph sent out by his father Jacob to join his brothers in the fields, Joseph receiving directions from the man at Shechem, his brothers stripping him of his many-colored robe and putting him in a well, his brothers staining the robe by dipping it in the blood of a goat, so that Jacob will think Joseph has been killed by a wild beast, his brothers selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites, his brother Reuben standing by the empty well and lamenting him, pulling at his clothes, and finally Joseph brought to Egypt by the Ishmaelites on the back of an animal.

A similar cycle of scenes, sometimes in an abbreviated form, decorated sleeve bands and shoulder bands. On a sleeve band of wool and linen tapestry weave in Vienna (Fig. 34), the same scene appears in the center, namely, Joseph's second dream.<sup>65</sup> The flanking scenes are paired in a bilateral symmetry inspired by draw-loom silks. At the bottom left and the top right is a portrayal of Jacob sending Joseph to join his brothers together with Joseph meeting the man who served as his guide; the scene at top left and bottom right is probably the staining of Joseph's robe. Since these ornaments were woven and worn in sets, it should be noted

that on any given garment the cycle would have been repeated several times, like the episodes from the life of Christ on the tunic in the Field Museum. On some of the patches, such as a wool and linen roundel in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 35), the scenes from the life of Joseph are accompanied by little crosses scattered above, below, and between the scenes.<sup>66</sup>

The same cycle of Joseph scenes also appeared in silks, which were the more expensive version of the ornaments in tapestry weave. A fragment preserved in Sens shows the story repeated in two registers on the same textile (Fig. 36).<sup>67</sup> Reading from the left of each row of scenes, the viewer sees Joseph's seated father sending him out, the man in the fields who guided him, and his reception by his envious brothers. The Greek inscription above the last of these scenes reads, "The dreamer cometh; now let us kill him."<sup>68</sup>

Although considerable research has been carried out into the relationships between these Joseph textiles and illuminated manuscripts,<sup>69</sup> to the author's knowledge no completely satisfactory answer has so far been provided to two basic questions: why was the life of Joseph so popular as a decoration for tunics, and why, within his long and eventful career, were just these few scenes from the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis chosen for illustration? It has been suggested that Joseph might have been popular as a model of personal conduct.<sup>70</sup> That was certainly an important aspect of the Joseph story, especially for preachers and hymnographers. But if a concern for personal morality were the primary motivation for the choice of Joseph scenes, one would expect to find an emphasis on such episodes as his denial of the advances of Potiphar's wife—a subject of much moralizing commentary.<sup>71</sup> Another suggestion is that Joseph is portrayed as a national hero of the Egyptians and Jews in Egypt;<sup>72</sup> but if this were the pri-

<sup>66</sup>Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1963.63.178.2; *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 160, no. 69.

<sup>67</sup>Sens, Cathedral Treasury; Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality*, 462, no. 413.

<sup>68</sup>Ο ΕΝΥΠΝΙΑCΤΗC ΕΡΧΕΤΑΙ ΝΥΝ ΟΥΝ ΔΕΥΤΕ ΑΠΟΚΤΕΙΝΩΜΕΝ ΑΥΤΟΝ.

<sup>69</sup>See especially G. Vikan, "Joseph Iconography on Coptic Textiles," *Gesta* 18, 1 (1979), 99–108 and, most recently, M. Friedman, "On the Sources of the Vienna Genesis," *CahArch* 37 (1989), 5–17, esp. 9–10.

<sup>70</sup>Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality*, 462.

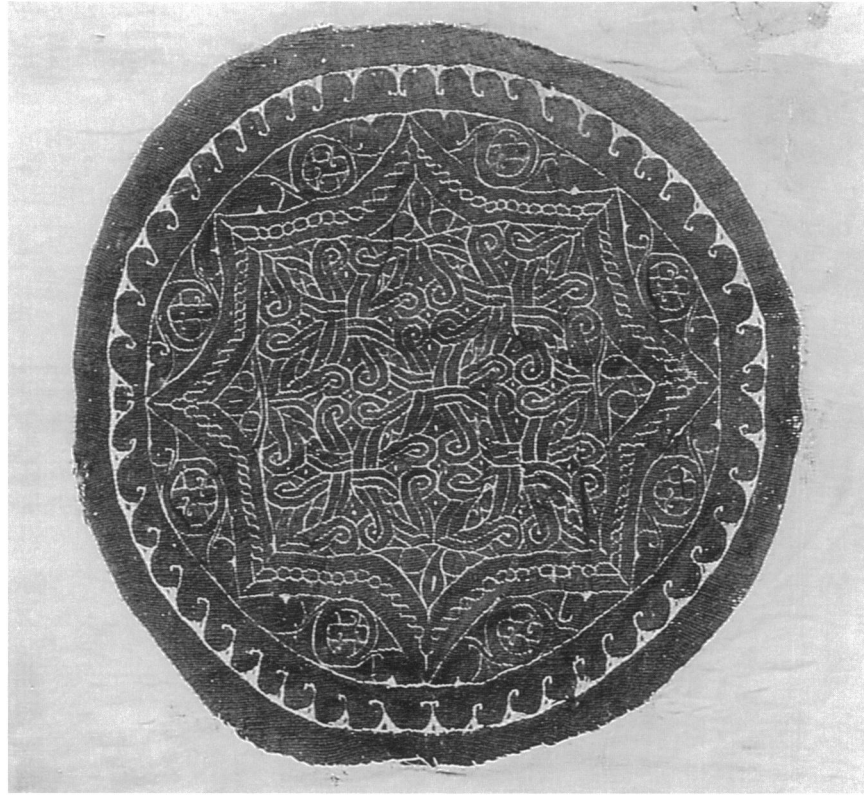
<sup>71</sup>See, e.g., the kontakion by Romanos, *On Joseph II*, ed. P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica* (Oxford, 1963), no. 44, 354–67.

<sup>72</sup>Vikan, "Joseph Iconography," 105 note 3; Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 106–8.

<sup>63</sup>On these textiles see Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, passim and, most recently, *Beyond the Pharaohs*, 160, no. 69. On a pair of clavi from a child's tunic in the Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, inv. no. 689, see Abdel-Malek, *ibid.*, 57, 216.

<sup>64</sup>Städtisches Museum Simeonstift, Trier, inv. no. VII.52; C. Nauerth, *Koptische Textilkunst im spätantiken Ägypten* (Trier, 1978), 24–31.

<sup>65</sup>Museum für angewandte Kunst, inv. no. T 691; *Koptische Kunst: Christentum am Nil*, exhibition catalogue, Villa Hügel (Essen, 1963), 341, no. 361; G. Egger, *Koptische Textilien* (Vienna, 1967), 20, pl. 44.



1 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, tapestry-woven medallion (funds from various donors, 1889). Interlace of knots (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



2 Shuneh-Nimrin, Jordan, floor mosaic. Knot with inscription (photo: Father Michele Piccirillo)



3 Coptic Museum, Cairo, stone relief. Knot of Hercules (after J. Strzygowski)



4 The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, amulet, obverse. Rider, demon, and lion (photo: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology)



5 The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, amulet, reverse. The evil eye under attack (photo: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology)

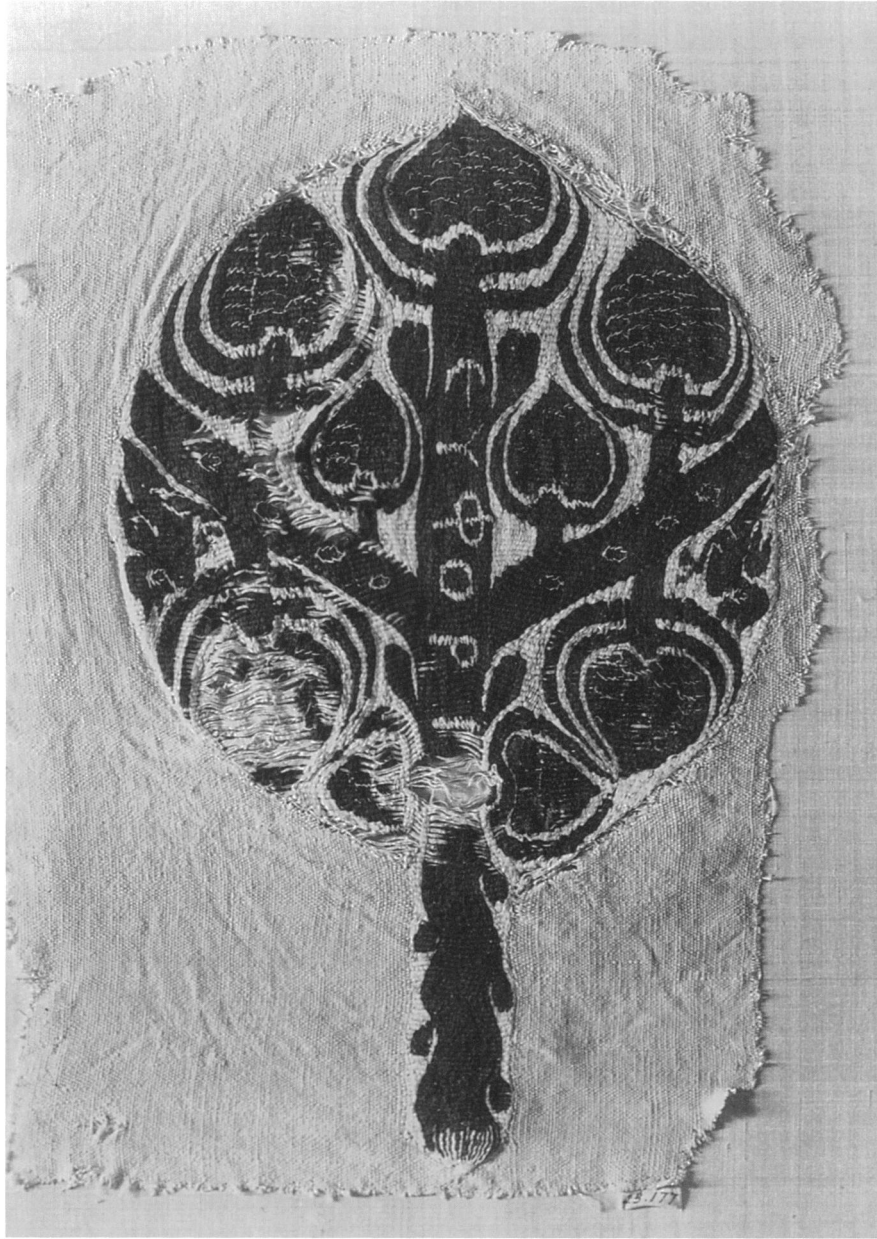




6 Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, tapestry-woven medallion. Rider and lion (photo: courtesy of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian Institution/ Art Resource, N. Y.)

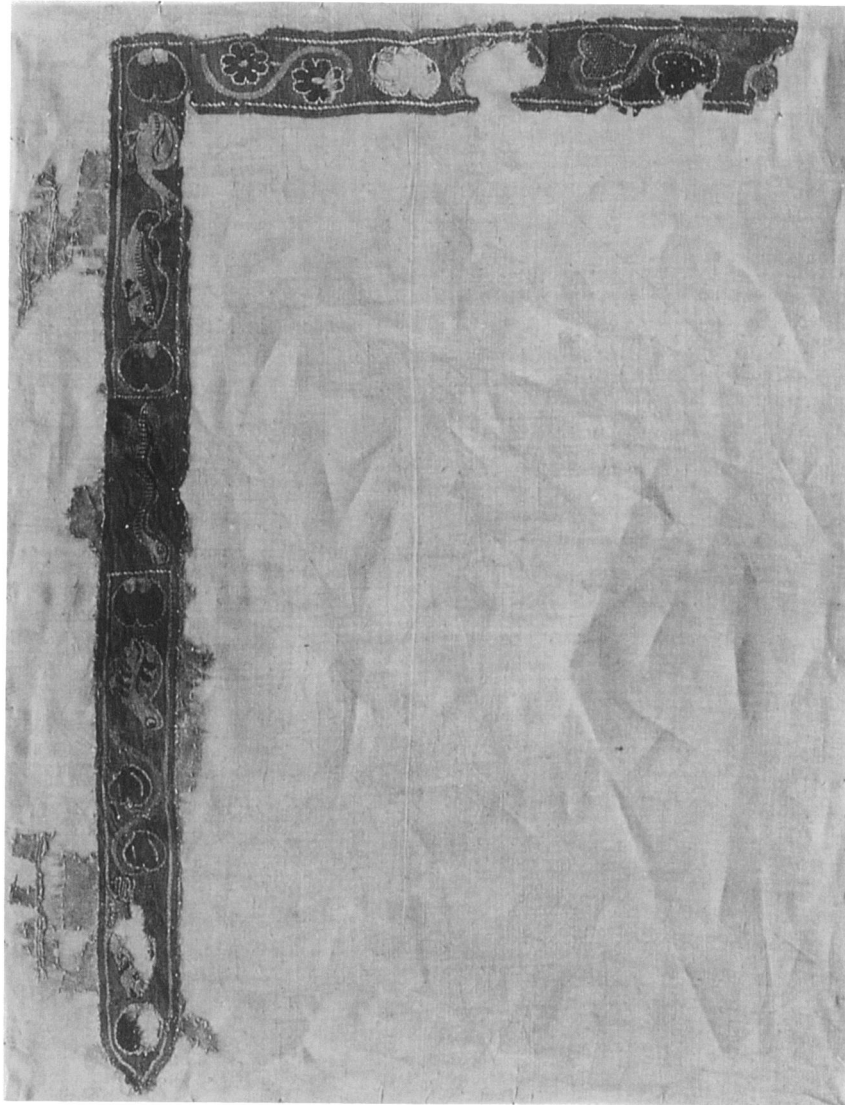


7 The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., tapestry-woven medallion. Rider and lion (photo: Textile Museum, 11.17)

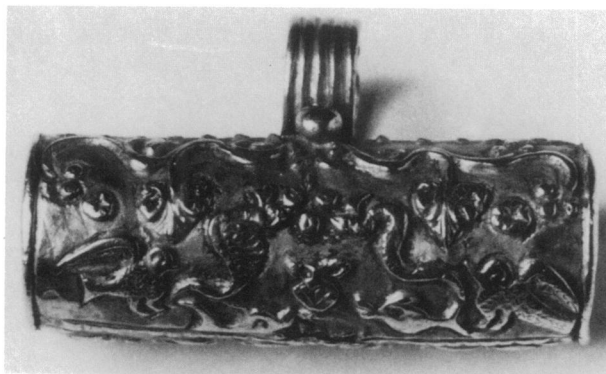


8 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, tapestry-woven curtain fragment. Flourishing tree (photo: Museum of Fine Arts)

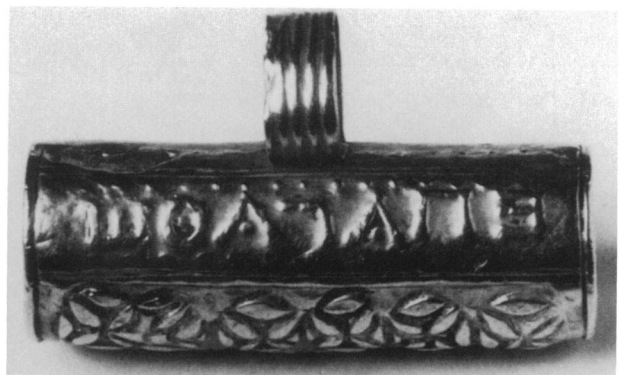




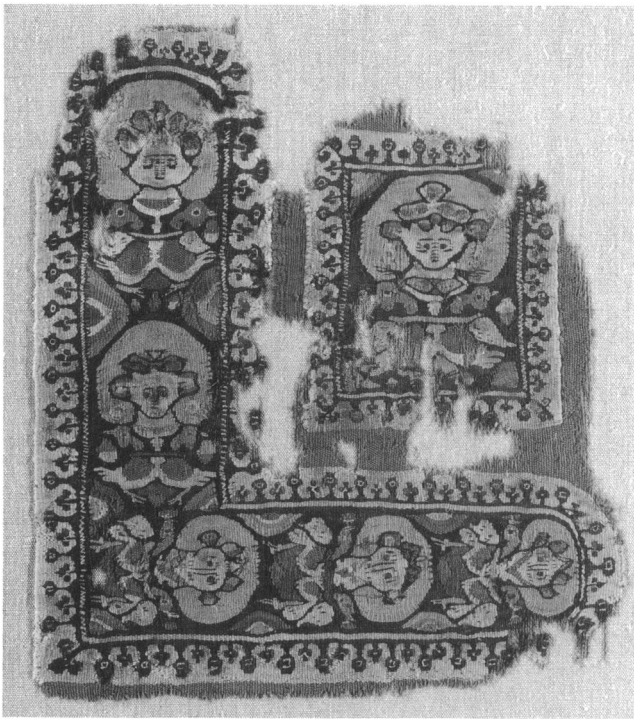
9 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, silk, wool, and linen band (gift of George F. Baker, 1890). Snake, fish, and birds (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



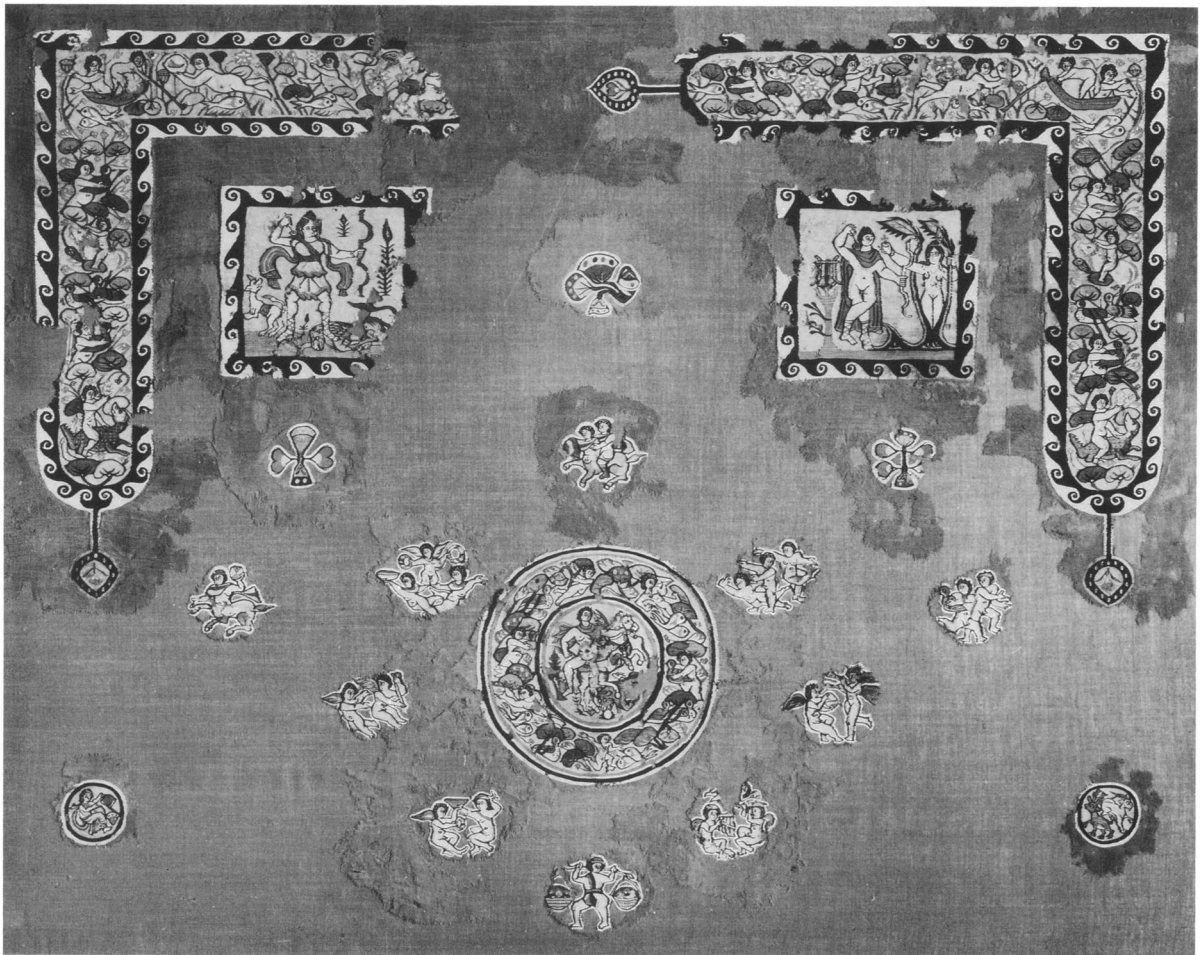
10 Frühchristlich-Byzantinische Sammlung, Berlin, gold phylactery. Snakes, fish, and birds (after V. Elbern)



11 Frühchristlich-Byzantinische Sammlung, Berlin, gold phylactery. Inscription (after V. Elbern)



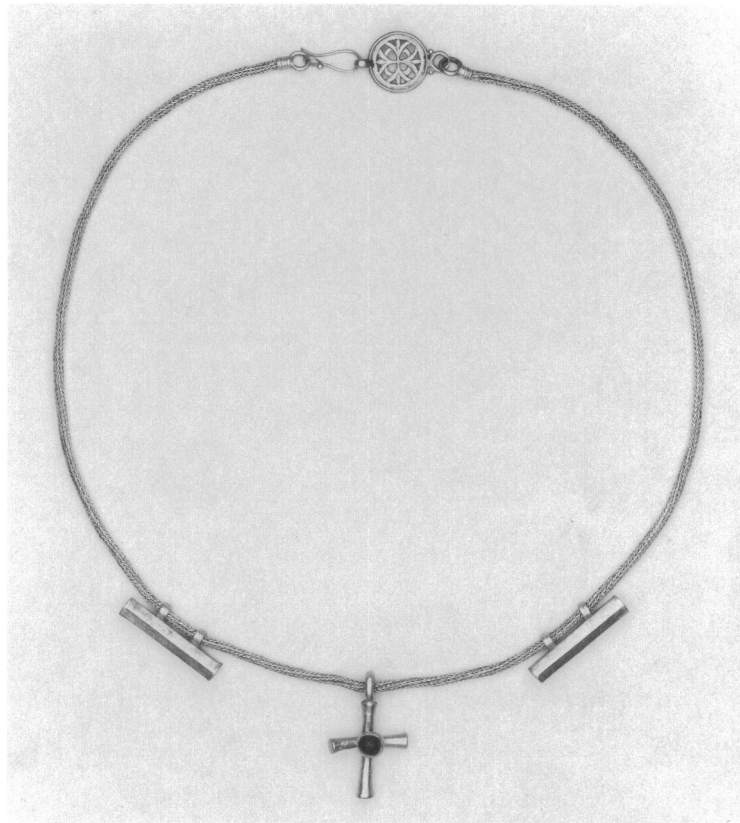
12 The Cleveland Museum of Art, tapestry-woven *segmentum* and *gammadion* (purchase, A. W. Ellenburger Sr. Endowment Fund). The Earth (photo: Cleveland Museum of Art)



13 Musée du Louvre, Paris, tapestry-woven shawl. Nilotic motifs (photo: Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris)



14 Musée du Louvre, Paris, tapestry-woven medallions. The Nile and Abundance (photo: Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris)



15 Indiana University Art Museum, gold necklace with cross flanked by amulet cases (photo: Indiana University Art Museum)



16 Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, mosaic of Orpheus from Jerusalem, detail. Theodosia





17 Brooklyn Museum, tapestry-woven tunic (after D. Thompson)



18 Malcove Collection, University of Toronto, bronze cross (photo: Malcove Collection)



19 Brooklyn Museum, tapestry-woven tunic ornament. "Light" and "life" (after *Pagan and Christian Egypt*)



20 Musée du Louvre, Paris, tapestry-woven panel. The Earth with crosses (photo: Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris)



21 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, tapestry-woven stole. Christ, Mary, and Apostles (photo: Worcester Art Museum)

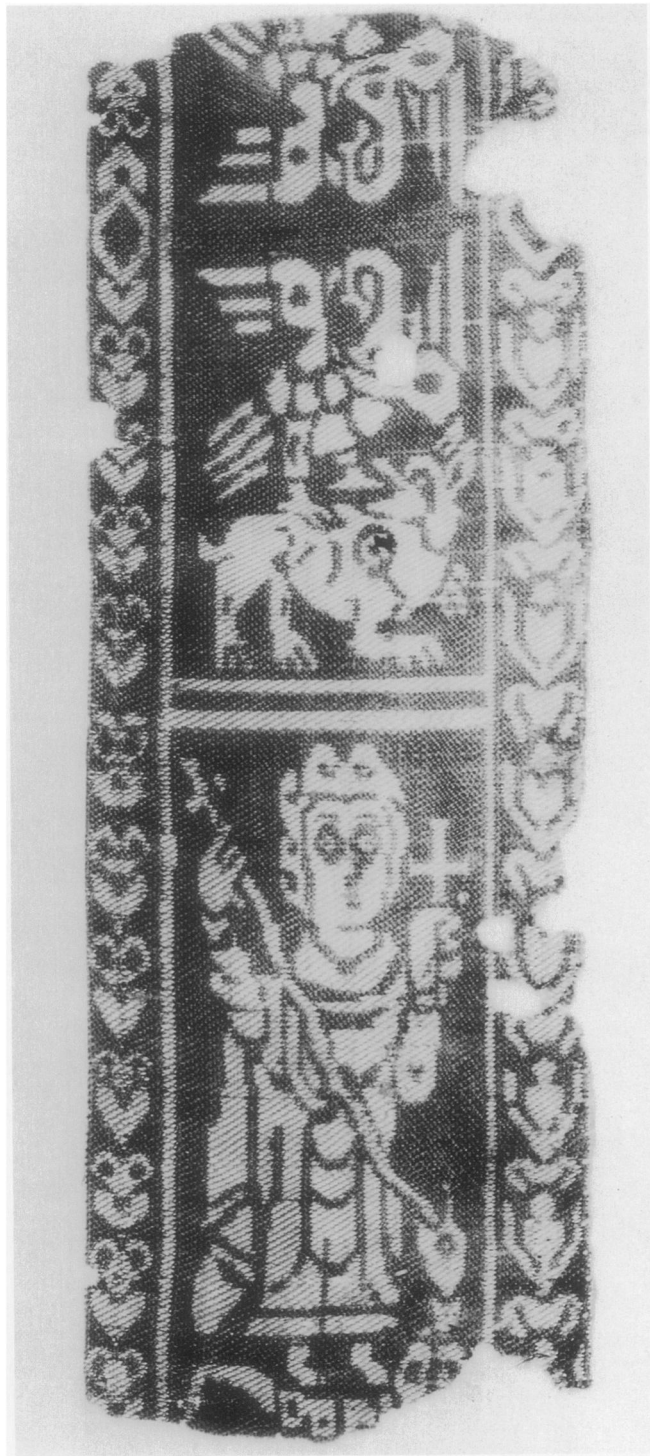


22 Arts and Crafts Museum, Prague, tapestry-woven band. Woman in orant pose (after L. Kybalová)

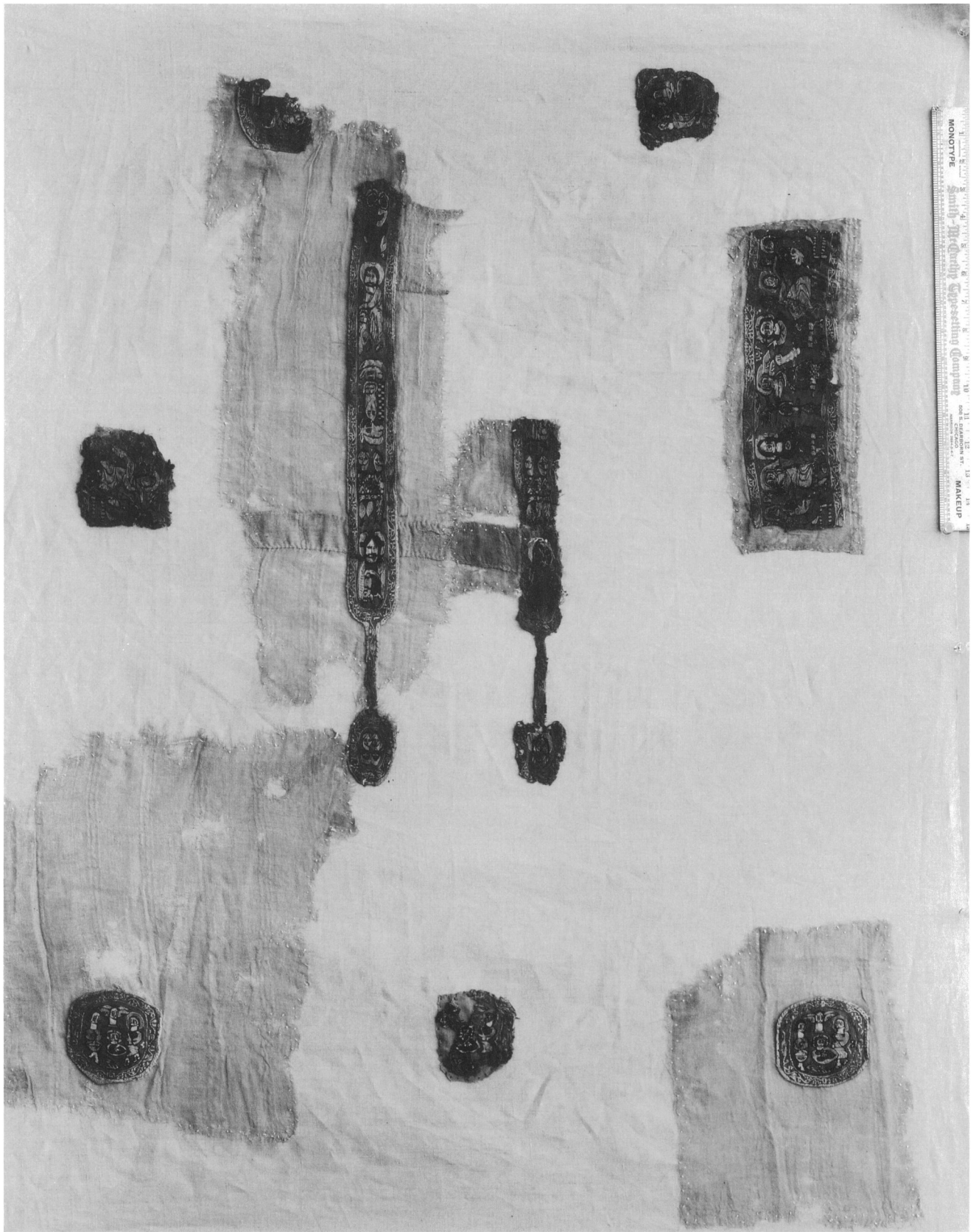


23 British Museum, hematite amulet. St. Procopius (after C. Bonner)





24 Philadelphia Museum of Art, silk fragment (given by Howard L. Goodhart). Soldier saint killing a dragon (photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art)



25 Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, tapestry-woven tunic fragments. New Testament scenes  
(photo: courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History)



26 Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, tapestry-woven clavi. Nativity and figures from the New Testament (photo: courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History)



27 Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, D.C., gold encolpium. The Virgin and Child between angels, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi (photo: Dumbarton Oaks)



28 British Museum, gold and niello locket. The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi (after O. M. Dalton)

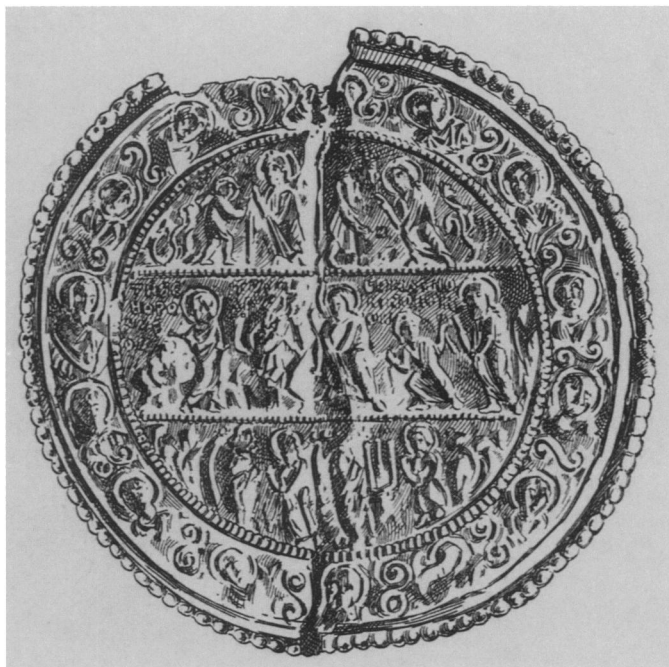


29 British Museum, tapestry-woven medallion. The Adoration of the Magi  
(photo: British Museum)



30 Museo Nazionale di Reggio Calabria, gold pseudo-medallion. Adoration of the Magi (after W. F. Volbach)





32 Gold encolpium found at Adana. Miracles of Christ with the Samaritan Woman at the Well (after *DACL*)

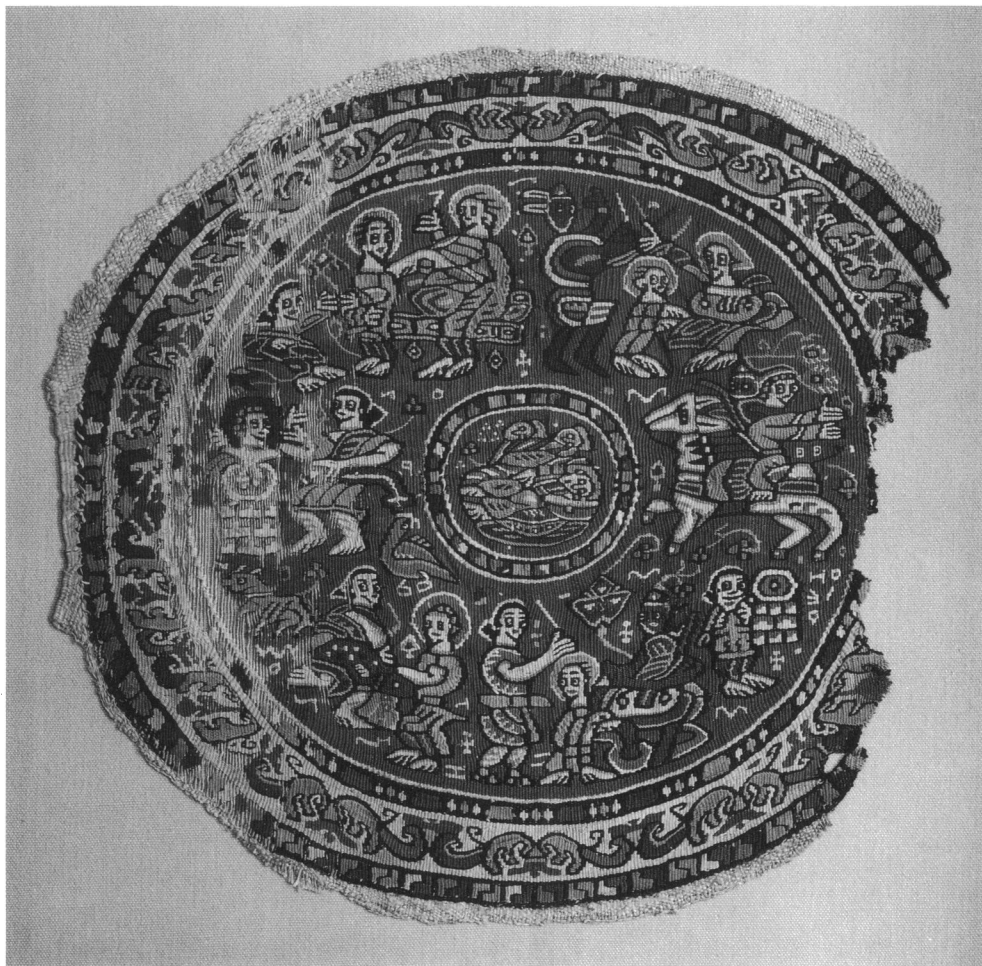
31 National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, tapestry-woven clavius. Miracles of Christ (photo: National Museum of Denmark)



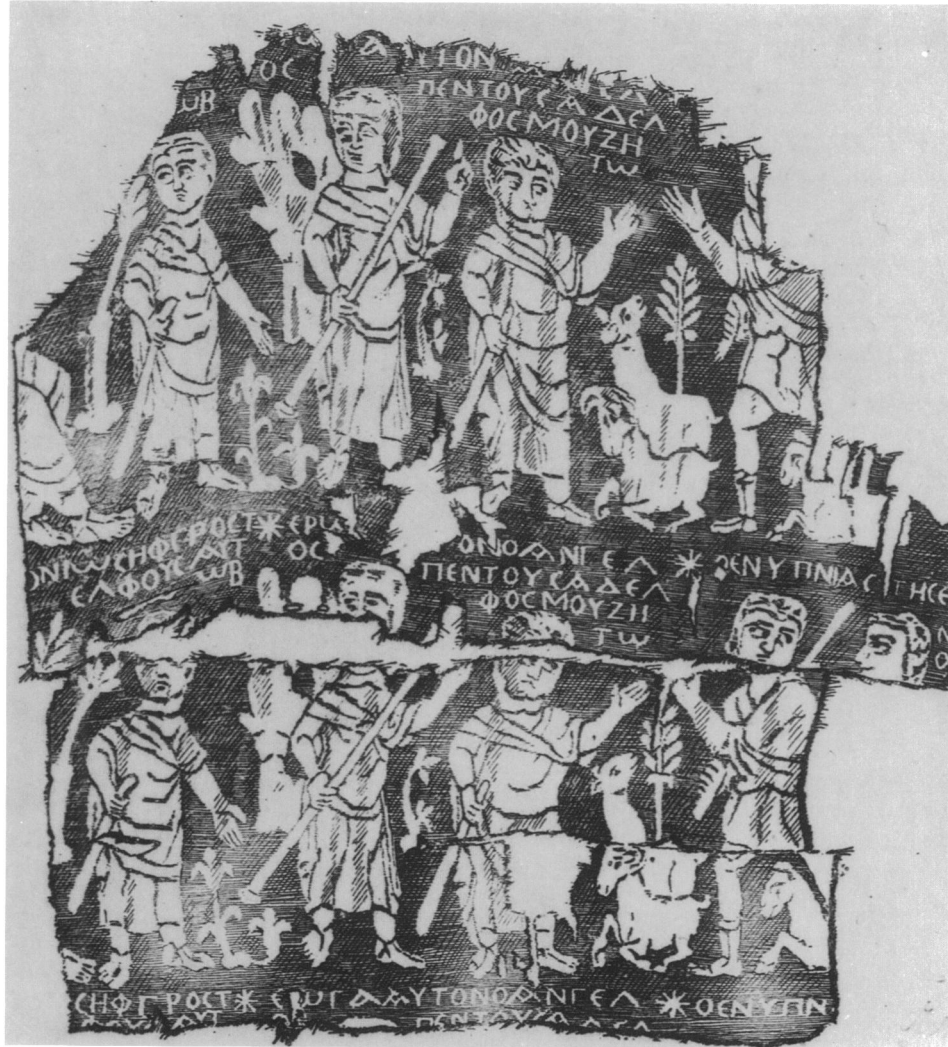
33 Städtisches Museum Simeonstift, Trier, tapestry-woven medallion. The envy of Joseph's brothers (after C. Nauerth)



34 Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, tapestry-woven sleeve band. The envy of Joseph's brothers (after *Koptische Kunst*)



35 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, tapestry-woven medallion (gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Wilkinson). The envy of Joseph's brothers (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)



36 Cathedral Treasury, Sens, silk fragment. The envy of Joseph's brothers (after O. von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei* [Berlin, 1921], fig. 27)



mary significance, one would look for illustrations of his rise to power and of his role in providing food during times of famine. Also, it is not even certain that all of the Joseph textiles are Egyptian; the silk in Sens has been attributed to a workshop at Antioch.<sup>73</sup>

There are three interrelated answers that can explain why these particular Joseph scenes were so popular on clothing. The first answer is the most obvious, and it has already been suggested by other writers: the tunics that incorporated these ornaments were literally robes of many colors, like the garment Jacob gave to Joseph.<sup>74</sup> But there is a second, more important answer, which derives from the role of the robe in this story. The many-colored robe, and the special favor that it signified, was a source of *envy* to Joseph's brothers. The Early Christian commentators singled out two episodes from the Bible that particularly concerned the evil consequences of envy: the story of Cain and Abel and the story of Joseph. In the first of these episodes, it ended badly for the victim of Cain's envy, for Abel was killed. In Joseph's case, however, the wrong that his envious brothers did him was followed by his eventual triumph over them, an event that is forecast in the central medallion of the roundels, the dream of sun, moon, and stars. The Joseph tunics, with their very specific selection of scenes, are a Christianized expression of that very common concern of people in Early Byzantine times, namely, the fear of the malevolent effects of envy, or the evil eye. We know from house inscriptions,<sup>75</sup> amulets,<sup>76</sup> and papyri that envy was as much of a worry to Christians as to pagans.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the Joseph medallions performed some of the same functions for their wearers as the amulets which showed the much-suffering eye being attacked by its opponents (cf. Fig. 5).

The third explanation for the popularity of these particular Joseph scenes takes its cue from the little crosses that appear on some of the roundels (Fig. 35), and concerns the well-known typol-

ogy of Joseph as a forerunner of Christ.<sup>78</sup> Many of the eastern church fathers who commented upon the envy of Joseph's brothers and the resulting sale to the Ishmaelites saw the story as a type of the envy of the Pharisees for Christ. According to this reading, the Pharisees envied Christ for his supernatural powers to heal and to raise people from the dead, but eventually these powers were to triumph. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, said that the coat of many colors represented the many-faceted divine power in which Christ was clothed by his Father, the power to cleanse lepers, to raise the dead, and to calm storms at sea. It was this divine power that drove the Pharisees to envy, just as it provoked the brothers of Joseph to jealousy (the word used by Cyril, *βασκανία*, can mean both jealousy and the malicious influence of the evil eye). The Pharisees killed Christ and dropped him into hell, as if into a well. But Christ returned to life from the dead, just as Joseph was raised from the empty well.<sup>79</sup> Coming closer in time to the textiles, Procopius, writing in the sixth century at Gaza, said that the brothers of Joseph are the Pharisees, who envied Christ because his father clothed him in a cloak of many colors—that is, in life and light which raised the dead and commanded the sea. Because of the signs and miracles of Christ, the Jews were consumed by the fire of envy. Jacob, continues Procopius, grieved for Joseph, while not knowing that his son was reigning in Egypt; just so, Christ is thought dead by the Jews, but among the Gentiles he lives and rules forever.<sup>80</sup>

In the light of these texts, the Joseph textiles can be read on many levels. They are the coats of many colors, which depict the story of the original wearer of the coat of many colors, who triumphed over the ill effects of envy. At the same time the coat itself is a symbol of the miraculous powers of Christ, especially his powers to heal people and to calm the elements that might threaten travelers. Seen in this way, the Joseph scenes take their place with the episodes from the life of Christ that appear on early Byzantine clothing as protective imagery. What could be better than to literally wrap yourself in the robe that images the power of Christ? The potential to protect in these few scenes from the life of Joseph may help to explain why they were so popular.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the im-

<sup>73</sup> Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality*, 462.

<sup>74</sup> Vikan, "Joseph Iconography," 105 note 3; Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 105–6.

<sup>75</sup> For Christian inscriptions directed against envy and the evil eye, see notes 31 and 32 above.

<sup>76</sup> For eye-shaped amulets that show rider-saints piercing their foes with cross-headed spears, see: Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 306, no. 319; *Art and Holy Powers*, 217, no. 136.

<sup>77</sup> Christian as well as pagan letter writers expressed the wish "may the evil eye not touch them" in reference to their correspondents' children (τὰ ἀβασκαντα τέκνα); see, for example, P. J. Sijpesteijn, *The Wisconsin Papyri*, II (Zutphen, 1977), 137–38.

<sup>78</sup> On the typology, see Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 111–12; Nauerth, *Koptische Textilkunst*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> *Glaphyra in Genesis*, 6; PG 69, cols. 301–5.

<sup>80</sup> *Commentarii in Genesis*; PG 87, 1, cols. 471–72.

agery of early Byzantine domestic textiles is that they present a very different type of art from that surviving in most churches of the same period. Household weavings, whether expensive silks or the cheaper weaves in wool and linen, were closely intertwined with magic. When Christian subjects appeared, the emphasis was not on instruction or dogma, as it often was in churches or in manuscript paintings, but on personal security and prosperity. The designs on domestic textiles were functional as much as they were decorative. For all that, it would not be correct to imply that people were unconcerned with the aesthetic value of these

weavings. "Be careful to have my tunic made properly," wrote a man to his sister at Oxyrhynchus, "and let them put good measure into it, and be large-handed in the coloring."<sup>81</sup> So much the better if the colorful designs, so rich visually, could also work *invisibly* on behalf of the wearer, to bring good fortune and to drive away evils.

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<sup>81</sup>A. S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, VII (London, 1910), 225–26, no. 1069.